

Talent Mobility: Reducing Self-imposed Barriers to Increase Mobility in Your Organization

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Organizations need the right talent to succeed, and they need it now.

Simply stated: I don't think there is a CEO alive who would not agree they need the right talent, at the right time, to achieve organizational commitments. And if they don't have the right talent they need, their organizational goals are therefore in jeopardy. A recent article by Gartner HR indicated that CEOs rank talent shortages as the most damaging risk on the outlook for their business.¹

To make matters worse, the world is changing at lightning speed (think Industrial Revolution 4.0) and emerging technologies and innovations require vastly different skill sets than were needed in the past. According to the World Economic Forum, *44% of workers' skills will be disrupted in the next 5 years and 6 in 10 employees will require training before 2027.*² While the lack of skills is a challenge today, the emergence of new skill requirements will be an even bigger challenge tomorrow.

Although there are many factors contributing to this 'talent crisis', including skill shortages, impending retirements, demographic shifts/ changes, etc., some of the main hurdles are those created and perpetuated by the organizations themselves. It will require awareness and a firm commitment to the eventual eradication of these barriers to make any inroads moving forward. Think of it this way: it is easier to battle external factors on the outside than it is having to also battle self-imposed challenges on the inside. Control what is controllable (i.e., internal challenges) and figure out the rest.

What is 'talent mobility'?

Talent mobility describes an employee's *ability* to move across positions within their company.³ From my perspective, the word 'ability' is the most important in this definition. The ability to move is a subjective term for both the employee and the organization.

- **From the employee side:** *To what degree do employees feel they can move to a job they want, when they want it, based on their career aspirations? Can they move in any direction they choose? Do they think they will receive fair and equal opportunity for consideration? Can they reach their career goals inside your organization?*
- **From the organizational side:** *Should we post all roles internally? Do we believe our employees should be given the first opportunity for internal roles? Should employees be able to freely navigate their personal career choices? Do we support non-traditional career moves?*

¹ 2024 leadership vision for 2024: Top 3 strategic priorities for chief HR officers. Gartner. (2023). Retrieved January 18, 2024, from <https://www.gartner.com/en/human-resources/trends/leadership-vision-chief-hr-officer>.

² Future of jobs report 2023 - World Economic Forum. (2023, May). Retrieved January 18, 2024, from https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2023.pdf.

³ Schreiber-Shearer, N. (2024, January 10). What is talent mobility? Definition and tips for success. Gloat. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from <https://gloat.com/blog/what-is-talent-mobility/>.

The collective impressions of your employees are paramount. It is the voice of your employees that should be the ultimate arbiters of success when it comes to mobility. Perception is reality.

How did talent mobility go so wrong?

Unfortunately, talent mobility is lacking in many companies. Employees often feel it is difficult or even impossible to change positions at their current organization. In fact, a report by Monster indicated that 80% of workers do not think their current employer offers growth opportunities.⁴ So, not only can employers be limiting the career options of their employees, but they may also be establishing barriers to career mobility causing the best and brightest to take their skills and services elsewhere.

I call this a ‘double whammy’: You begin with one job opening where you didn’t give an internal employee a chance to be considered, and now they have left – resulting in two job openings. The cycle perpetuates and the challenge worsens.

But wait, what is the goal of internal mobility again? Isn’t it to provide employees with a chance to reach their career goals at your organization and reduce the regrettable turnover of your best and brightest?

I believe so, and if that is the case for you as well, something needs to change. If leaders are ‘dealers in hope’, maybe they should start with a promise or a commitment to internal talent mobility: *We will provide our employees with the first opportunity to achieve their career goals here, and will accomplish this by addressing and removing identified barriers - systems, policies, structures, and culture behaviours.*

What self-imposed barriers exist today? What are the solutions?

There are many self-imposed barriers to enabling a culture of internal talent mobility. Here is a checklist outlining some of the main cultural, policy, and process considerations that may be getting in your way.⁵

⁴ Job index in the time of coronavirus. (2021, July 12). Source: Monster poll conducted among Monster members. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from <https://learnmore.monster.com/job-index-in-the-time-of-coronavirus>.

⁵ Williamson, J., & Carroll, D. (2023, November 20). How to start smart with a talent marketplace. MIT Sloan Management Review. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from <https://app.sloanreview.mit.edu/2023/11/20/how-to-start-smart-with-a-talent-marketplace/content.html>.

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Culture - *The way things are done around here*

Mobility Challenge	Business Impact	How to Address it?
<p>Talent Hoarding Managers want to keep their best employees and discourage/ prevent them from pursuing other opportunities.</p>	<p>If an employee is prevented from leaving the team, they decide to leave the organization.</p>	<p>Change the <i>mindset</i> of managers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From → Manager owns talent • To → Organization owns talent <p><u>Other recommendations:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize managers to move talent • Publicize and share successes of internal moves
<p>Employee Fear Employees are reluctant to seek out new roles/ assignments for fear that they will appear disloyal to their current supervisors.</p>	<p>Employee engagement and performance will decline over time.</p>	<p>Change the <i>role/ mindset</i> of managers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From → Retain my best (at all costs) • To → Let my best go (if they want to explore other opportunities)
<p>Narrow/ irrelevant Selection Criteria Hiring managers reject less-than-perfect internal applicants based on criteria that are too specific or not relevant to success in the role.</p>	<p>If employees adopt the mindset 'I guess I will never achieve my desired role here', they will leave to achieve it somewhere else.</p>	<p>Change the <i>selection criteria and mindset of managers:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From → There is a 'perfect candidate' (unicorn out there, and I must find them (looking externally first). • To → There are no perfect candidates. I need to find the best candidate for the role (looking internally first). <p><u>Other recommendations:</u></p> <p>Use the addition by subtraction rule:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take your list of the top 10-20 skills/ competencies for the role. 2. Reduce the list to only the 'must have' skills/ competencies (5-6) that are most important to success. 3. Identify the required level of proficiency to be successful for each competency or skill. 4. Screen candidates on only the essential skills/ competencies. 5. Hire the best fit for the role. 6. Devote training, support and/ or coaching to close necessary gaps

<p>Limited/ Traditional Views</p> <p>Managers and employees emphasize upward progression or only seek opportunities in their current function/ business area.</p>	<p>If employees cannot explore other non-traditional career moves, they will go elsewhere to do so.</p>	<p>Change the <i>views/ norms</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From → Progression based on traditional career moves (career ladder) • To → Progression to any role, in any direction (career lattice) <p><u>Other recommendations:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise roles internally • Deconstruct jobs into required competencies/ skills to enable employees to navigate their careers based on interests and skills
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Policies - *The policies relating to internal recruitment and career mobility.*

Mobility Challenge	Business Impact	How to Address it?
<p>Restrictive Policies</p> <p>Policies that restrict/ limit internal movement (i.e., the employee must be in a role for a certain amount of time before moving to another role).</p>	<p>If employees are prevented from leaving their current roles, they will leave the organization instead.</p>	<p>Change your <i>policies</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From → Policies that include restrictive, outdated, or irrelevant language that impedes goals (movement is viewed as too disruptive) • To → Policies that include open, relevant, updated language that balances employee and business needs (movement is required) <p><u>Other recommendations:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate arbitrary time periods (i.e., an employee must be in current role for 6 months to move) that add no value • Make exceptions to keep your best people in your company

Processes - *The steps, roles, and accountabilities of internal stakeholders.*

Mobility Challenge	Business Impact	How to Address it?
<p>Bureaucratic processes</p> <p>Processes that slow the placement of internal talent down (i.e., hiring managers must go through additional steps to hire internally vs. externally)</p>	<p>If employees can move to an external job faster than they can move to the same one internally, they may decide to leave.</p>	<p>Change your <i>processes</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From → Complex, lengthy, and bureaucratic process • To → Short, simple, and value-added processes <p><u>Other recommendations</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think about ways to make the process faster and provide employees with a positive experience. • Treat employees as a customer of the process.
<p>Restrictions for Recruiters</p> <p>Requiring recruiters to identify only external talent when filling a role or opportunity.</p>	<p>If an employee is not considered for an internal role, they will leave and go somewhere else.</p>	<p>Change your <i>restrictions</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From → Require recruiters to focus solely on external talent • To → Require recruiters to seek internal talent first (internal headhunting)

Conclusion

This information is not rocket science, nor does it have to be to make an impact. Most problems are a lot easier to solve if you break them down into the basic elements and build from there.

It is beneficial to go back in time to highlight the simplicity of these practices and demonstrate that internal mobility is not a new concept – it can work amazingly well.

When I first started my career in HR over 20 years ago, I worked at Kraft Canada in Toronto. At the time, Kraft was regarded as the Harvard of career development because of its ability to find a replacement for the outgoing CEO in less than 2 business days. Why? Well, because all our internal HR practices were biased toward retaining internal employees. Each part of the talent management process reinforced a philosophy of identifying, selecting, developing, and retaining employees and leaders today, so they could build their careers over the long term. They fundamentally believed their current employees were their best assets.

This is a simple practice that can be easily adopted by any organization. It starts with a vision for the future, and a commitment to making the processes, policies, and practices consistent with one goal: *How can we leverage our internal employees first?*

Kraft did it 20 years ago, and you can accomplish it now.

About the Author



Mark Coulter, MIR, CHRP, CHRL, is a talent management and organizational development expert and leadership coach. He has over 20 years of experience in human resources with a focus on leading talent management functions in automotive, retail, consumer packaged goods, and beverage organizations, including Fortune 500 and Fortune 50 companies such as Campbell Soup and Lowe's. Mark has expertise in implementing end-to-end talent solutions in the areas of talent acquisition, employee & leadership development, performance management, succession planning, and career development. He currently works as the Vice President, Talent Management Solutions at HRSG, where he partners with clients to design and implement competency-based talent management solutions to achieve business and workplace outcomes.

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